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ABSTRACT

In this lesson, students work with primary documents and latter-day photographs to recapture the experience of traveling on the Oregon Trail. The learning objectives of the lesson are: (1) to learn about the pioneer experience on the Oregon Trail; (2) to evaluate a historical re-enactment in light of documentary evidence; and (3) to synthesize historical data through creative writing. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (6-8), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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On the Oregon Trail

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Lesson Plans

SEARCH EDSITEMENT

Introduction

In this lesson, students work with primary documents and latter-day photographs to recapture the experience of traveling on the Oregon Trail.

Learning Objectives

(1) To learn about the pioneer experience on the Oregon Trail. (2) To evaluate a historical re-enactment in light of documentary evidence. (3) To synthesize historical data through creative writing.

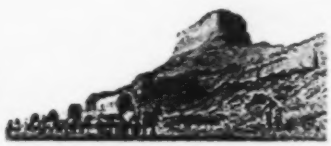
Lesson Plan

Guiding Question: What was it like to travel West on the Oregon Trail?

1 Begin by asking students to imagine that they are producing a movie on the Oregon Trail. Working in groups, they will write a scene for the movie that is historically accurate and based on the kinds of experiences emigrants actually encountered on their way West. For background on these experiences, have students read a selection of the following memoirs, available through EDSITEment Websites:

- "Across the Plains in 1844" at **New Perspectives on THE WEST**.
  In Chapter One, Catherine Sager describes how she and her siblings became orphans when their family made the journey to Oregon.
- "Overland Trail Lore and Early Life" at **American Memory**.
  An interview that includes "Excerpts from the published reminiscences of James Meikle Sharp, who, at the age of eight, crossed the plains with his mother and father in 1852."

2 As a follow up to their reading, give each group a set of pictures showing a reenactment of the trek West on the Oregon Trail. The pictures below are available through EDSITEment at **The Digital Classroom** website. (Click picture for larger image.)



Literature: Biography

History: U.S.: Immigration/ Migration

History: U.S.: The West

6-8

One to two class periods

information gathering and research
primary document analysis
critical thinking
historical analysis
creative writing
collaboration
public speaking and presentation
Internet skills

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

2. Time, Continuity, and Change (more)
3. People, Places, and Environments (more)
5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions (more)

National Geography Standards

9. The characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations on earth's surface (more)
12. The processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement (more)
13. How the forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of earth's surface (more)
17. How to apply geography to interpret the past (more)

Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and non print texts to build an understanding of

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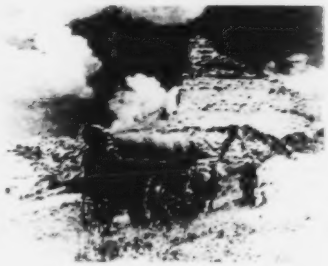
texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately... (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
17. Students use a variety of technological and information resources...(more)



3 Ask students to examine the pictures in light of their reading. For additional insight, have students visit **The Oregon Trail** website on EDSITEment, focusing on the pages listed below. (You can also provide print-outs of these pages in classrooms with limited Internet access.)

- Jumping Off: describes preparations for the 2,000 mile journey.
- Power: explains why emigrants chose mules or oxen to pull their wagons.
- Hardships: describes the physical risks of the journey -- fatigue, accidents, storms, disease, and dangerous river crossings.
- Camping: documents the daily routine of trail life.

4 Invite students to comment on this reenactment in their role as imaginary filmmakers. How does it compare to the scene they have in mind? Have each group suggest additional details that would accurately represent the emigrants' historical experience. Students might note, for example:

- The emigrants traveled in large caravans that stretched for miles over the plains.
- Most emigrants walked alongside their wagons, which were so packed with provisions that there was little room left inside.
- Unlike the 49er's, who were mainly men, the pioneers of the Oregon Trail traveled in family groups, including many women and children.
- Though many emigrants used mules like those shown in the pictures, records suggest that many more relied on oxen to pull their wagons across the plains.
- Emigrants typically took along herds of cattle to stock the farms they dreamed of starting in the Oregon Territory.
- Descriptions of the pioneers suggest that their wagons were practically bulging with provisions for the journey and furnishings for their Oregon homes.
- Descriptions of the great immigration also suggest that the trail itself was littered with broken equipment, discarded items, and all the other junk that thousands of travelers would typically leave in their wake.

5 Encourage students to make imaginative use of this research as they work together in their groups to script a scene depicting an incident that could have occurred on the Oregon Trail. To provide them with a framework for their collaboration, create a worksheet based on the outline headings below. (For more technical filmscripting guidelines, visit the Cinema exhibit at the

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Learner.Org website on EDSITEment.)

- **Location**: Describe where your scene takes place. (Students can view modern-day pictures of "Historic Sites along the Trail" at **The Oregon Trail** website. For a more historical view, **The Digital Classroom** provides access to photographs taken by William Henry Jackson in 1870: Heading west from the North Platte River in Wyoming ; approaching Independence Rock; and traveling the plains along the Sweetwater River.)
- **Casting**: Describe the characters who appear in your scene and the roles they play -- mother, father, children, warrior, caravan leader, etc. -- including "extras" who help provide a backdrop for the action.
- **Props**: Describe the wagons, animals, and other items that a filmmaker would need to stage your scene.
- **Action**: Describe what happens in your scene, including any "special effects" and dialogue.

6 Conclude the lesson by having each group "pitch" its scene to the class, as at a Hollywood production meeting. This could involve preparing storyboards for the scene's establishing shots and acting out parts of the action. Follow each presentation with a class critique of the scene's historical accuracy focusing both on elements that reflect the real experience of pioneers on the Oregon Trail and elements that take liberties with the historical record.

Extending the Lesson

- Introduce students to the story of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, the first settlers to make the overland journey to Oregon. Extensive excerpts from Narcissa Whitman's diary are available through EDSITEment at the **New Perspectives on THE WEST** website, which also includes a synopsis of the Whitman's tragic experiences taken from the PBS documentary series, THE WEST.
- Invite students to contrast the emigrant experience with that of the 49er's who followed the Oregon Trail on their way to the goldfields of California. Reminiscences of gold rush days are available through EDSITEment at the **New Perspectives on THE WEST** website, in the "California as I Saw It" collection at **American Memory**, and at the **California Gold Rush** website.